The ground we stand on

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Body

Wissahickon schist is a grey stone. When you look closely at it, this rock shows tiny, shining flecks of mica and maybe even the occasional micro garnet embedded in it. Quarried in Mt. Airy, a community in northwestern Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, it provided a cheap, readily accessible source of workable stone.

The parking lot of a popular local diner, where I sampled their take on the Philly cheese steak on Monday this week, sits on the floor of an old Wissahickon schist quarry.

Homes, churches, and old corner stores of a certain age, more likely than not, incorporated this building material in their construction. The result creates a distinctive architectural and esthetic character in Mt. Airy's older neighbourhoods such as the one I stayed at on Carpenter Lane.

The slate-roofed and Wissahickon schist sided houses there dated from the 1880s.

Slowly making my way back home to the Yukon, I boarded an overnight bus a couple of days ago, leaving Philadelphia bound for Columbus, Ohio. Every seat was filled.

My seatmate as far as Wheeling, West Virginia, turned out to be a young fellow who couldn't have been much out of his teens. After finishing a few days off work enjoying what the big city had to offer, he was heading back to a job on a fracking rig drilling in eastern Ohio.

Over the course of the night, he talked of his 18-hour work days, which I later found out could possibly be permitted because of labour-law loopholes that allowed time after a break of as little as 90 minutes to be considered a new work day. I am sure that the hazards of work around the rigs he talked of had to be heightened by that practice.

The wage of $22 an hour, though, had him coming back. He had never seen that much money before. One thing he couldn't understand, though, was the protests he faced.

Protests abound. In Quebec where the orange placards on roadside poles in the Richelieu River valley I saw read, "Non aux gaz de schiste!"

Protests had at least one party in the current provincial election, the Quebec Solidaire, calling for a complete ban on fracking. Opponents across the belt running down both sides of the Appalachian mountain chain south of Quebec have expressed their concerns about groundwater pollution, methane gas leaks, land subsiding, well blowouts, wastewater dumping, ruined landscapes, and a host of other issues.

Sandra Steingraber, of New Yorkers against Fracking, also argued in a Huffington Post blog that "sending a polluting industry into our most economically impoverished communities is a violation of environmental justice."

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Short-term booms followed by the inevitable busts don't justify the public health and environmental costs, critics argue. Illusory notions of economic gain can't be allowed to trump climate change concerns or air and water quality.

The rig my young travelling companion worked on was putting pipe down 800 metres, then fanning it out horizontally into gas-bearing shale strata. The clay and sand brought back up in the drilling process is mixed with water and a host of chemicals into a slurry to make the water "slippery."

This then gets pumped back down the well casing when the drilling reaches the target depth. Under tremendous pressure it fractures the shale and then the gas follows the wastewater or "flowback," which is now possibly contaminated with heavy metals, low-level radiation, as well as the original chemical cocktail, back up the pipe.

The roustabout talked of the holding pond built near the rig site he works on to hold the vast quantity of water needed in the process. Drilling went below the level that most drinking water was drawn from, so he couldn't understand the water issue at all. He just hadn't made the connection.

We all use the materials of the earth. Homes built from Wissahickon schist and possibly heated by natural gas from fracking in eastern Ohio provide examples of this.

However, we abuse these natural riches at our peril. What have we learned from the environmental calamities we have seen from Shell in Nigeria, to Exxon in Alaska or Chevron in Ecuador, not to mention the not-uncommon fracking well failures in New York and Pennsylvania?

The ground we stand on provides for us. We have to stand our ground to protect it.

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NAMASTE NOTES

Sunday, August 26 -Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time. A suggested reading is John 6:60-69.

Monday, August 27 -The Kellogg-Briand Pact signed in 1928 by 60 countries renounces war as "an instrument of national policy."

Tuesday, August 28 -Martin Luther King Jr. gives his famous "I have a dream" speech at a civil rights rally in Washington, D.C. in 1963.

Wednesday, August 29 -Beheading of John the Baptist is remembered because of his role in preparing the people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

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